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MONDAY MAY 19, 2008 :: Last modified: Monday, June 11, 2007 9:10 AM MDT

Duo tells students how meth ruined lives

By WALTER COOK
The Riverton Ranger

RIVERTON -- At 6 p.m. on a Sunday, Tilano Montoya and Kenzie Crawford had a tough task ahead of them: they had to walk into the Fremont County Detention Center in Lander and turn themselves in to police.

Now, they're behind bars, waiting to be sent to a federal prison. Where they will be taken and for how long they will be there, they don't know.

It's the price they are paying for dealing methamphetamine, and they have fessed up to it in very public fashion.

Before them sat dozens of high school students cramped into a corner of the Riverton High School library on a recent Friday. It was nearly 3 p.m., but the students were not anxious.

There were no inconsiderate whispers in a neighbor's ear, no laughter, not even a hint of a smile could be seen in the crowd. Several of the students even wiped away tears.

Their collective reaction was an appropriate reflection of the presentation given by Montoya, 34, and Crawford, 27, who had just detailed how methamphetamine destroyed their and their families' lives, and how they ruined the lives of others by selling the drug.

"I'm asking for your forgiveness for corrupting our community, our reservation," a teary-eyed Crawford said to the students. "We sold to our own people. All we cared about was money, our drug. Now look at us."

Both Montoya and Crawford are members of the Northern Arapaho Tribe, which, along with the Eastern Shoshone, calls the Wind River Indian Reservation home.

Montoya expressed equal shame at his former life, saying: "We infected all of you, our community, our reservation, and we're going to get punished."

And things don't look good for the two.

The sentences given to the other meth dealers busted in and around the reservation along with Montoya and Crawford in a May 24, 2006, sting operation has averaged 10-20 years.

Fremont County Coroner Ed McAuslan, who helped arrange the duo's marathon session last week of giving a series of harrowing presentations throughout the community from sunup to sundown, said he hopes U.S. District Court Judge William Downes will consider their educational effort when he hands down their sentence in about two months.

Downes postponed their sentencing strictly to allow them to give their presentations, although, McAuslan noted, the presentations officially have no bearing on their potential sentences.

The two originally were charged with conspiracy to possess with intent to distribute methamphetamine, as well as a number of other drug-related charges.

They were among 43 people who were pulled out of their homes at gunpoint by federal, state and local authorities in one of the largest drug busts in Wyoming's history. The bust came as a result of a two-year investigation.

Authorities say those arrested were members of the "Hermasillo Methamphetamine Trafficking Group," which came to the reservation because of a perceived shortfall in law enforcement, because of the complicated nature of the area's jurisdictional patchwork and because of a ready supply of willing "customers," including impoverished tribal members already addicted to alcohol who received a monthly royalty check.

The Mexican gang sought to replace alcohol addiction with meth addiction, authorities said. The group apparently succeeded, allegedly distributing seven pounds of meth per month to customers primarily

on the reservation.

Twenty firearms, \$100,000 in cash and 20 pounds of meth were seized in the bust.

Twenty pounds may not sound like much, but consider this: authorities say a one-gram "baggie" of meth can get eight novice users high. And a meth high is a good deal for users compared to a stimulant like cocaine. Users say the high lasts much longer.

Meth is also much cheaper, hence its nickname, "poor man's cocaine." A gram of meth in Fremont County ranges from \$100-\$150, according to law enforcement officials.

To make matters worse, this is not the same meth that Montoya got hooked on 13 years ago, when all that could be found in Fremont County was "crank," or powdered methamphetamine.

The stuff the authorities found during the bust of the Hermasillo cartel was in crystalline form, meaning it was almost 100 percent pure meth, making it much more addictive and dangerous. Crank is only 20-30 percent pure, but crystal meth, or "ice," can be 85-98 percent pure, experts say.

Despite its purity level, meth contains some extra ingredients, as Montoya pointed out to the audience.

"There's battery acid, antifreeze -- these things aren't made to be put in the human body," he said.

Meth also often contains other toxic ingredients, according to experts, including drain cleaner, red phosphorous and ammonia. These are used to extract the active ingredient from the meth precursor ephedrine, which can be found in many cough medicines.

Thanks to meth, popular cough medicines, such as Sudafed, no longer can be purchased over the counter.

Because of its toxicity and potency, prolonged meth abuse can lead to an array of health problems, including heart and skin complications, and psychosis, conditions Montoya is familiar with.

"These ingredients come out through your pores," he said. "I would see beautiful girls who would turn to ugly girls -- not only their appearance but their personalities."

Montoya reiterated the common horror stories about meth: heavy users clawing at their arms trying to rid themselves of imaginary bugs, known as "meth bugs" and in the process opening sores formed by toxins leaving the body through the skin; and once-attractive individuals with blackened, rotting and missing teeth because the drug dissolves tooth enamel.

But with such horrible potential consequences, why would anyone try meth?

In Montoya's and Crawford's cases, they wanted to be where the action was, that is, they didn't want to miss out on the next party.

When Montoya first heard his friends talk about a drug that increases awareness, reduces fatigue and makes one feel "unstoppable," he wanted to try it. He was hooked. Meth lived up to its promises -- for a time.

"This drug had its hold on me so powerful," he said. "It controlled me."

As his use of the drug progressed, Montoya found he needed more and more of it to get high.

"I had to deal it to pay for my habit," Montoya said. "I knew if I was dealing it I would always have it."

According to authorities, like U.S. Assistant Attorney Bob Murray, "addict dealers" are the heart and soul of the meth trade.

Montoya told the students that meth had such a hold on him that if he hadn't been caught by now, he would be lurking outside of the high school, ready to sell meth to a willing buyer. In five years, he surmised that he would be in the same situation, only "worse."

Montoya and Crawford directed much of their regret toward their children, saying during the few months they have spent in jail since they were arrested, they already have missed out on a large part of their children's lives, and are all but certain to miss out on more.

Montoya is the father of three, while Crawford is the mother of four.

When Crawford was arrested, her three elementary school-aged children were present, and she was pregnant with her youngest, who is now 7 months old.

"I'm going to miss out on her first tooth, her crawling, her walking," she said. "I chose meth over my kids."

But experts, such as Casper police officer Scott Jones, say absentee parents aren't the biggest threat meth-using parents pose.

He said many cases of severe child abuse can be traced to meth. He estimated that the vast majority

of children in foster homes in Natrona County are there as the result of meth use among parents.

Fremont County's demographics are similar, he said.

The presenters stressed that meth isn't a just a "reservation problem." The drug can be found everywhere they said, and anyone, regardless of race or class, is susceptible to its addictive pull.